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ABSTRACT

This commentary contends that Henry J. Perkinson's arguments in "Teachers without Goals, Students without Purposes" (1993) are, on the whole, a failure. This criticism is based on the following points: (1) terms such as "modernism" and "postmodernism" are used without adequate definitions; (2) the book inadequately makes the case that knowledge comes from within the knower; (3) the book uses Popperian evolutionary epistemology, which does not fully support its position concerning knowledge from within; (4) the book also poorly supports its claims that learning occurs better without purposes and that transmission of knowledge from teacher to student is immoral and prevents further growth; (5) in the book's discussion of transactions from teachers to students, it confuses authoritarian with authoritative transactions; (6) the book asserts that children are born with "understandings," yet it states that without language, understanding cannot exist; (7) the book insufficiently anticipates problems in dealing with students' individual needs and interests in large, diverse classrooms; and (8) the book argues that individuals can know from within and can do so without any justification, which rejects a justificatory theory of rationality. The commentary agrees with Perkinson that students should not merely be filled up with facts, that knowledge has no ultimate justification, and that education should be tailored to the individual. (JDD)

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AN ANALYSIS AND REVIEW OF PERKINSON'S TEACHERS WITHOUT GOALS, STUDENTS WITHOUT PURPOSES

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An Analysis and Review of Perkinson's Teachers Without Goals, Students Without Purposes

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Henry J. Perkinson's latest book Teachers Without Goals, Students Without Purposes (1993) is an odd one. The book tries to make a case for (as the title suggests) teacher's having no goals and students having no purposes. This is somewhat problematic in itself, and the way he brings the matter out is no less so. Although I sympathize with some of his points, his argument is, on the whole, a failure.

The main text is split into three sections: "Against Modernism," "Against Post-modernism," and "Beyond Post-modernism." The use of such terms without adequate definitions can often get one into trouble, and Perkinson is no exception. Perhaps the most troublesome thing about these terms is that he has made things no clearer by using them. For example, modern theory is oddly characterized as Baconian science (where observation precedes theory), where the teachers "transmit" knowledge to their students. Perkinson perhaps should have used the Lockean notion of "tabla rasa," which would have made things somewhat clearer. Beyond this rather fuzzy characterization of modernity Perkinson goes on to lump Rousseau and Dewey into this tradition on the basis that learners are seen as receptors of some sort. Nothing is mentioned about these philosophers' concerns about individuals and their interests.

The alternative Perkinson holds up against the modern educators is a tradition that spans from Socrates to Skinner. While the so called moderns (Comenius, Rousseau, etc.) assumed that knowledge comes from "without" (i.e., comes from somewhere external to the knower and is some how transmitted to him/her), the alternative position is posited as maintaining that knowledge comes from "within" (i.e., not from outside the knower). Although Plato thought that learning was recollection, it was for very complicated reasons. Even so, one might argue that even Plato thought that knowledge came from without, i.e., knowledge comes from communing with the Forms.

Skinner is a completely different kettle of fish. In About Behaviorism (1974) he states:

> A person is **not** an originating agent; he is a locus, a point at which many genetic and environmental conditions come together in a joint effect. [p. 168, my emphasis]

His philosophy (in a nut shell) is that we are controlled by genetic **and** environmental factors. In fact attributing behavior to causes from "within" (black box and metaphysical theories) was one of the key aspects Skinner spent his whole life trying to purge from psychology. Perkinson has not done an adequate job in making his case here, either for the category of the moderns or the characterization of their counterparts.

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Perkinson is adamant about the idea that knowledge does not come from without, but that: "Human beings create their knowledge" [p. 8]. In other words, we make sense of what we encounter in the world. If we construct a correct hypothesis about the world, we have a smooth ride. However, if we construct incorrect ones, the world "kicks back" and we have to construct new hypotheses to get us back on track. The fact that the world does indeed kick back seems to weaken his position almost straight away. In support of his inner knowledge hypothesis, Perkinson uses Popperian evolutionary epistemology, but this fails to fully support his position. Evolutionary epistemology is the view that knowledge (belief) evolves through a series of trial and error eliminations (akin to natural selection). In Conjectures and Refutations Popper states that:

> The method of trial and error is not, of course, simply identical with the scientific **or critical approach**...The method of trial and error is applied not only by Einstein but, in a more dogmatic fashion, by the amoeba also. [p.50, Evolutionary Epistemology, emphasis mine]

In either case, for the scientist or the single celled creature, environmental factors play an important role.

There is a great deal to evolutionary epistemology, and it is certainly not merely knowledge from without. However, it is not just knowledge from within either. Natural adaptation is not merely an internal **conscious** process. Which is to say that natural selection is not necessarily an internal adaptation in the sense that entities think about something before they adapt in all circumstances. Joan Burstyn makes a similar observation when she states that Perkinson bases his evolutionary metaphor "on an interpretation of Darwinism that does not take into account the discovery of DNA and its role in providing a genetic code for developing organisms" [p. 103]. For example, certain cockroaches are immune to various bug sprays, but this was not a conscious decision on their part. When first sprayed with the substance, some lived and some died. Those that perished are gone and so is their DNA, while those that lived were adapted to their new environment. Cockroaches do not think about their genetic make-up and consciously change it. Furthermore, the adaptation not only involved the inner (non-conscious) make-up of the cockroaches, but also involved the external environment. If a different bug spray was used perhaps different cockroaches would have survived to spread their genes.

Learning too involves both internal interests and environmental conditions. To say that we adapt to our environment (a la evolutionary epistemology) is in effect saying that both "inside" and "outside" aspects are involved. Perkinson fails to make a case for the dualism of outer and inner learning and for the idea that learning from within is the way of true education. Both learner and environment are inseparably bound up with each other as biological parts of a whole. Evolutionary epistemology recognizes this and perhaps

Perkinson does too, but he does not make it clear that this is what he is arguing. The division he makes between inner and outer causes is an interesting gimmick, but is groundless in fact.

Perkinson's idea of teachers without goals and students without purposes is an outgrowth of his interpretation of evolutionary epistemology. This is clear when he states: "If human knowledge grows through a process of trial and error elimination, then this is how students learn in school" [p. 16]. Subsequently Perkinson makes the point that "Purposes are not **necessary** for learning" [ibid., my emphasis]. Indeed purposes may not be necessary for learning, but this does not entail that learning occurs better without them, as he is trying to maintain. In addition to ignoring student purposes, teachers should have no goals for their students. The idea of goals after all entails, according to Perkinson, that teachers are trying to "transmit" something - namely knowledge. Perkinson maintains that not only is this transmission not possible, but it is also immoral and prevents further growth. Allegations that are poorly supported at best.

The claims that Perkinson makes concerning the immorality of an act of transmission is especially irksome. He claims that "the attempt to transmit knowledge to students corrupts education" [p. 18]. He claims that such an attempt denies two things: the teachers own fallibility and the students' agency. This is not necessarily the case. Here Perkinson confuses authoritarian with authoritative transactions. Although some teachers do shove facts down students' throats in an authoritarian manner, many do not. Teaching in schools today is not necessarily authoritarian. A position can be held and argued for by teachers who have a thorough command of their subject, i.e., as an authority. To be an authority is quite different from being authoritarian. As an authority, one can be conscious of one's own fallibility, yet transmit good advice to willing students. The attempt to convey advice, such as how to write a check, does not deny students' agency. In fact, transmission of such knowledge assumes that students will exercise personal agency sometime in the future. Is the transmission of knowledge such as check writing immoral? I think not, but the non-transmission of such skills may be.

Educators have a moral responsibility **to** transmit some skills to the students, so that they will have a chance at becoming good citizens. Joel Spring, a critic of Perkinson, makes this clear in his essay "Critical Pedagogy and Political Power" [pp. 94-100]. Although I do not agree with Spring entirely, I do agree that some knowledge is worthy of transmission. Unfortunately, Perkinson seems to see all types of knowledge transmission as authoritarian. Again, he has not made his case adequately.

Despite Perkinson's shaky foundation his recommendations do have some merit. For instance, he states that: 1) education need not be authoritarian, 2) teachers can

facilitate learning, and 3) education can help students knowledge to continue to grow [p. 19]. Perkinson rightly maintains that educators must try to create an environment for learning that is free, critical, and supportive. Teachers armed with agendas (such as teaching a skill), rather than goals (the line of distinction between the two is somewhat fuzzy) first must find out what the pupil can do in a non-judgemental, free, environment. The teacher then coaches the pupil in a critical environment to help the student hone the skill. Criticize the performance, not the student, and praise the student, not the performance is the golden rule that is advocated here [p. 28]. Both aspects, the free and the critical, are couched in a supportive environment so that the pupil understands that it is the skill that needs work not him/her. This seems to be good advice, but it is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, it is based on the erroneous idea of inner knowledge and the fact that Perkinson believes we are born with "understandings" [p. 29]. Yet such understandings are embodied in language (speech, writing, etc.). The question arises as to whether or not a child is born with language. Given that children do not grow up speaking Russian when everyone around them speaks English, it seems that language is a learned activity. Thus we can not be born with understandings. We all have the capacity for language at birth, but nothing is embodied in a language; because one has not yet been acquired. Perkinson does not help his case when he says: "Without language, understanding cannot exist" [p. 29]. So how he can assert that we are born with understandings is unclear.

Second, the critical approach is offered as a panacea of teaching ills. Perkinson explains that teachers following the modern line often encounter student resistance. This is true enough, but he offers the critical teacher as a remedy. He admits that there may still be problems (e.g., students may resist criticism), but these can be resolved by creating a more supportive environment for the student. This solution is all well and good, but in an era where teachers must attempt to manage overflowing classrooms, the solution begins to seem impractical.

While trying to teach an agenda to a room full of students, dealing with individual resistance becomes a rather overwhelming task. Attending to students' needs and interests is fine for small classrooms, but as the size increases, so does the diversity of its occupants. Of course we could just keep the size of the classroom to a minimum, but the point here is that Perkinson does not anticipate this problem with the rigor that he ought to. The problem of attending to the individual needs of a child in a diverse classroom has been a perennial one since the advent of progressive education. The future holds only greater diversity in the American classroom, so it is important for any pedagogical theory to face (indeed answer) this problem of diversity of needs. Perkinson, again, does not do this

sufficiently.

Peter W. Airasian also attacks the practicability of Perkinson's ideas in his article "Critical Pedagogy and the Realities of Teaching" [pp. 81-93]. Airasian makes several good points. First, the diversity of classrooms makes identifying individual needs difficult (as mentioned above). Second, critical pedagogy's goalless environment makes the problem of teacher (and student) accountability worse. How do we evaluate performance in a critical classroom? Third, criticism is not an abstraction, one must always be critical of something, some subject matter. Although Perkinson tries to refute Airasian, he fails to adequately answer his queries [pp. 114-6].

There are other problems with Perkinson's ideas on a more fundamental level. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of Perkinson's new book (outside of his idea of inner knowing) is his idea of "knowledge without justification." Perkinson would have us believe that not only can we know from within, but we can do so without any justification whatsoever. He whole-heartily rejects a justificatory theory of rationality. Persuasive techniques such as arguments and experiments are old hat, according to Perkinson. Merely because one does not hold a foundational theory of knowledge (where one builds-up his/her knowledge from indubitable truths) does not mean that knowledge cannot be justified. Even in a fallibilistic notion of science (e.g., the theories of science of Peirce and Popper) one can justify one's beliefs through argument and experimentation. In a pragmatic notion of knowledge, for instance, beliefs are justified through a systematic method of experimentation and held until refuted.

On the other hand, Perkinson embraces the Popperian notion of fallibilistic knowledge. He states: "By uncovering falsities and inadequacies in our knowledge and eliminating them, our knowledge grows" [pp. 56-7]. How are we to do this? - Perkinson does not say. Obviously one verifies, or falsifies, via experimentation. Arguments are justifications, perhaps not **ultimate** justifications, but justifications just the same.

To justify belief does not etch a belief in immortal stone. What justification does is to bring the belief into the discussion, an ongoing discussion. I am not taking the side of verificationism in this debate. Indeed falsification is more powerful, but it is important to note that failure to falsify is to justify (at least temporarily). Furthermore, even in a critical classroom questions concerning justification will be asked. The questions of "Why?" and "How do you know?" will still arise in Perkinson's classroom, perhaps even more so (since the questioning environment is more open) and the answer will still be: "Because, thus and so."

"The Critiques and Rebuttal" section in Perkinson's book points out some interesting problems in his text. Both Airasian and Burstyn point to problems of the practicality of

critical pedagogy. While Spring and Airasian make good cases for some basic needs that can only be fulfilled by transmitting some knowledge (e.g., issues of safety). However, the critics included in this last section do not quarrel with many of the fundamental problems with Perkinson. I hope this essay has, in part, filled that lacuna.

In summary, although I have a great many reservations about what Perkinson says, I agree with him in several ways. First, students should be "brought around" via agendas rather than filled-up with facts. Second, knowledge has no ultimate justification. And third, education should be tailored to the individual. However, in each aspect that I agree with him, I also disagree with him. My idea of bringing someone around begins with personal interests, but also utilizes argument, an explanation from "without." I cannot accept his ideas about knowledge coming merely from within. Learning involves the participation of student **and** the world. Secondly, knowledge can be justified in some sense, via experimentation. And lastly, education should be individualized as much as possible, focusing on a person's interests, but the student needs to be taught the rudiments of functional literacy. This to say that socialization to some extent is necessary (e.g., knowing the 3 Rs). This last point is perhaps the most difficult to sort out.

How does one allow students to develop as they will and equip them for the "outside" world? It would be immoral and irresponsible not to prepare a student for the living of life in a society. Yet it seems all too optimistic to let them roam free in a critical classroom - a child may not learn what it needs to. We should strive to keep a critical conversation going in the classroom (and in society), but we also should shape and be shaped to take a place in that conversation. There is a middle ground between forcefully filling up the pupil and hoping the pupil will fill him/herself up. But this is a question another book will have to answer, because Perkinson's does not adequately answer it in his Teachers Without Goals, Students Without Purposes.